

The Hemlock Society of Indiana
Indianapolis, Indiana
October 28, 2000

WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD SUPPORT PHYSICIAN ASSISTED DYING A FAITH ACCOUNT

Introduction

I'd like to start with the story of John Wesley, the great religious reformer and founder of Methodism. His story is in a way the story of every believer who gives heed to what "life" has to teach us. Wesley began as a legalistic, guilt-ridden Anglican priest. He was the embodiment of the hide-bound, tight-assed cleric. He might well have remained that way to the end, a forgotten cleric of the Church of England and never become one of the great spiritual fathers of the human race were it not for an "experience" he had. He had a profound experience of the love of God in his heart of hearts – his heart was suddenly softened and warmed, his life was turned around and he began to see things in a new light.

Wesley realized that, contrary to what he had been taught, Scripture and Tradition were not in themselves reliable guides to saving truth. They had to be augmented by Reason and Experience. It was not enough to say that it's "in the book" or "that's always been our tradition" – religious truths had to "make sense" and not be contradicted by faith-filled experience.

Now the reason I start with that little vignette about John Wesley, is because when it comes to the issue of physician assisted dying, believers fall on either side of the great divide in John Wesley's personal life. Those on the "far side" of the divide (John Wesley BEFORE his transforming experience) simply rehearse Scripture and Tradition, leaving human reason and revelatory human experience totally out of the equation. Those on the "near side" of the divide (John Wesley AFTER his transforming experience) feel perfectly comfortable augmenting their sacred writings and traditions with human Reason and contemporary Experience. That is a very significant difference, because it opens the door for "near side" believers to support assisted dying and still remain persons of faith.

As we begin the 21st century, "far side" believers still greatly outnumber "near side" believers but there is a significant shift going on, and every day more and more people of faith are moving to the "near side", opening their consciences to assisted dying. This does not mean that "near side" believers don't still have a very serious problem with the Hemlock position, but it does mean that such believers are able to see Hemlock members more as kindred spirits than as enemies, and that dialogue with Hemlock is possible. As a "near side" believer myself, in my remarks today, I want to show how it is possible to make that move to the "near side", and then raise the one remaining problem "near side" believers have with the Hemlock position. Of course, the "far side" believers, many but

not all of whom are fundamentalists, will have none of this, and would place a pox on both our houses.

The View From The “Far Side”

The Judeo-Christian view from the “Far Side” is straight forward and simple, one might even say simplistic. It rests on several texts from the Bible which are interpreted as putting the matter of assisted dying totally out of the question. From the Old Testament book of Genesis we read:

If anyone sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for the image of God has man been made (Genesis 9:6)

From Exodus and Deuteronomy we have the 5th Commandment: “Thou Shalt Not Kill” (Exodus 20:13 & Deuteronomy 5:17). But the citation most often used in this one from Deuteronomy:

Learn then that I, I alone, am God, and there is no God besides me. It is I who bring death and give life.” Deut. 32:39

And from Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians in the New Testament we read:

Are you not aware that you are the temple of god, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple (I Cor. 3:16-17)

For “far side” believers, who take these Scriptures passages very seriously and literally, such texts definitely settle the matter, there is nothing to discuss, nothing about which to dialogue. Is it any wonder, then, that the Judeo-Christian Tradition would build on that foundation in the hope of buttressing the case against euthanasia, suicide, and assisted dying with rational arguments?

Traditionally, there have been arguments put forth to buttress those Scripture texts. Briefly, they go something like this:

The Argument From Self-Preservation

Every living thing loves its own life, and does all in its power to remain in existence. This is a natural drive in all that lives. They resist all forces which threaten their existence. Suicide, Euthanasia and Assisted Dying all go against this natural law of life and are to be considered immoral.

The Argument From Divine Dominion

All life is a gift fro God who alone has the power to give life and take it. Whoever takes his own life does an injustice to God, just as one who kills another’s servant does an

injustice against the servant's master. Human beings ought not usurp to themselves a matter not entrusted to them. It belongs to God alone to give life and take it away.

The Argument From Exaggerated Individualism

Human beings are not merely autonomous "individuals". Like it or not we are naturally "social", bonded to one another in community. To unilaterally decide to end one's life and take oneself out of the community does injury to the community and the common good, which is why in most societies there are laws against suicide. Because of the social ramifications of killing oneself, it should be considered an injustice against the community and hence immoral.

THE VIEW FROM THE NEAR-SIDE

If one is not a person of faith, it is easy to dismiss the "far side" position as religious mumbo-jumbo and to embrace the Hemlock position unconditionally. However, if one is a believer, someone who takes one's religious commitment seriously, it becomes much more difficult. For such a person, like myself, it is necessary first to confront and answer the religious arguments, and only then to align oneself, however conditionally, with Hemlock. In what remains of my talk, I would like to do just that. First, with thanks to John Wesley, I want to confront the traditional Judeo-Christian position with a "view from the near side", and second, to share my remaining reservations about the traditional Hemlock position.

1. Confronting the Scriptures

We know that the Bible is not a book with a single author. It was written over thousands of years, in different historical circumstances, by authors with different historical perspectives. Because of the great diversity of circumstances and authors, the Bible's meaning can never be found in a single text taken out of its historical context. The folly and absurdity of that can be seen in the fact that a literal interpretation of Exodus 21 – would allow parents to sell their daughters into slavery; of Leviticus 15 – would prohibit any human contact with a woman while she is menstruating; of Leviticus 25 – would condone slavery; of Leviticus 10 – would require one to believe that eating shellfish is an "abomination"; of Leviticus 20 – would refuse access to the altar of God of anyone with defective eyesight; and a literal interpretation of Exodus 35 – would require the execution of those who don't keep the Sabbath. Do those things sound like "divine revelation" to you? Of course not. And neither does the literal interpretation of those texts usually cited against suicide and assisted dying.

The fact is, the ultimate authority in Christianity is not a book at all but the active and revelatory presence of the Spirit of God in human life and throughout all creation. The Scriptures as we have them are not "left to themselves" divine revelation. As all but the most fundamentalistic of Scripture scholars now agree, they are the work of human beings responding to a divine revelation which occurred "in their lives". So John Wesley got it exactly right, the Bible becomes revelatory, becomes the "Words of God" for us,

only when it confirms and corroborates what the Spirit of God is revealing in our lives and experience as human beings today. When there is conflict between the Word of God “in life” and the Word of God “in the book” – it can only be because we have misunderstood what’s “in the book”.

Obviously, Christians misunderstood what’s “in the book” when they quoted the Bible against Copernicus and Galileo. They misunderstood what’s “in the book” when they invoked Scripture to validate slavery. In our own 20th century they obviously misunderstood what’s “in the book” when they used the Bible to justify segregation, apartheid, and the continued subjugation of women. And they misunderstood what’s “in the book” when they quote Deuteronomy to forbid assisted dying.

The text from Deuteronomy is not a metaphysical statement about who has sovereignty over human life. When we read: “Learn then that I, I alone, am God, and there is no God besides me. It is I who bring death the give life.” (Deut. 32:39), we are reading a text which has to do with an agrarian society whose concern was the fields and flocks which sustained their lives. What the authors of Deuteronomy are saying to the farmers and herders is: “Don’t think that offering sacrifice to idols and pagan gods will do you any good. It is Yahweh who sustains your lives, there is no other.” The issue of suicide, euthanasia and assisted dying are the furthest thing from the authors’ minds, they are concerned about the idolatry of Jewish peasants. To say otherwise, is to misunderstand Scripture and close one’s mind to what God is revealing about those matters in present day experience. That is why if am to quote Scripture on the issue I never tire of citing the passage from the Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus): “In the beginning God created man and woman and then left them in the hands of their own counsel.” (Sirach 15:14).

2. Confronting the Tradition

As we have seen, the tradition attempts to buttress its misunderstanding of Scripture with rational arguments. However, once one invokes reason in behalf of one’s position, one should understand that reason cuts both ways, there are always rational arguments on both sides of an issue. So, when believers put forth their traditional arguments, it is to be expected that opponents will rise to pose counter-arguments, counter-arguments which may very well be more convincing than the traditional ones.

a) Countering the Argument From Self-Preservation

The argument From Self-Preservation states that suicide and assisted living go contrary to two basic laws of life. Taking one’s own life goes against the natural love of one’s own life we all have, and also against nature’s own protective shield for life – the law of self-preservation.

The counter-argument points out that we are not merely instinctive beings, but are endowed with reason, freedom and human dignity. So in our case, the natural instinctive laws of life are subject to our free will and choice. Also, very often people seek assistance in dying precisely because they love life and don’t wish to

experience its total diminishment or degradation. So, far from always being against the laws of nature, assistance in dying can often be in accord with them.

b) Countering The Argument From Divine Dominion

Based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of the Deuteronomy text, believers have generally held that life is a gift from God, and so God alone, has dominion over life and death. So we have believers holding on the one hand that “life” is a gift from God, and at the same time holding that the life with which each of us has been “gifted” somehow remains God’s property giving God absolute dominion over it. This strikes me as a patent contradiction. Believers cannot have it both ways. Either life is a “gift” from God, or God retains dominion over it granting us life in a way similar to an inter-library loan. Our lives then are not truly ours, but remain the property and possession of God who has put them in our keeping only for a time. This is a gross misunderstanding of what it means to give a gift. If life is truly a “gift”, then in granting us life God has by that very act also granted us complete dominion over it. Which means that we have the authority to end our lives if and when we so choose. To say otherwise, demeans not only us, robbing us of the human grandeur which God has given us as a birthright, but it also demeans God, the Giver of Gifts.

c) Countering the Exaggerated Individualism Argument

As a believer, I have had no difficulty countering the Judeo-Christian arguments from Scripture, from Self-Preservation, and from Divine Dominion. It is the third traditional argument which causes me to pause – the argument from Exaggerated Individualism. It is an argument which has generally been ignored by Hemlock, and is the source of my own reservations about the Hemlock position. I have saved it until last, because it deserves a more extended treatment than the other arguments.

Confronting Hemlock & The Exaggerated Autonomy Argument

Let me begin by recalling something of the wisdom of Rabbi Abraham Heschel. In his book, Who Is Man?, he makes a clear distinction between “human being” and “being human”. While closely related, they are not identical. “Human being” is a biological fact. One qualifies as a member of the species homo sapiens, if one has the right biological make-up, the human genotype, the human DNA pattern. Consequently, it is very easy to determine whether a being is a human being or not, you run a biological test of its cell structure. By calling “human being” a fact, Heschel means to say that whether one is a “human being” or not is totally beyond one’s control, it is not a matter of one’s will or choices – it is simply a genetic endowment.

It is otherwise with “being human”, which is a task or goal which one must choose to strive for. Now Heschel, once a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, observed that one could very well have the appropriate genetic endowment, and hence qualify as a “human

being” and be totally lacking in those things which determine whether someone with that particular biology is “being human”. His prison camp experiences convinced him of the frightening possibility of populating the earth with beings each one of whom qualified as a member of homo sapiens, but not one of whom qualified as “being human”. One can test biologically whether one is a human being, but by what sort of test could one discern whether a human being is being human?

In his own reflections on the matter, Heschel came up with two distinct tests for someone’s “being human”. The first test Heschel suggests for determining if someone is “being human” is to evaluate his or her essential relationships, i.e. how he or she relates and responds to the realities encountered in the living of life. That, he thought, will tell you whether one is not only a “human being” but is also “being human”. Heschel puts it this way:

Our being human depends upon certain relations without which we cease to be human. Our being human is constituted by our essential sensibilities, by our modes of response to the realities we are aware of – to the being that I am, to the being that surrounds me, to the being that transcends me, or, more specifically, by how we relate to the existence that we are, to the existence of our fellow men, to what is given in our immediate surroundings, to that which but is not immediately given. (p16)

Obviously, on such a test, his Nazi guards would not qualify. But he goes on to give a second test for “being human” in these words:

Being human is the humanization of being, the transmutation of mute givenness. The root of creativity is discontent with mere being, with just being around in the world. Man is challenged not to surrender to mere being...Insufficiency of mere being drives man to more-than-being, to bring into being, to come into meaning. We transcend being by bring into being – thoughts, things, offspring, deeds. (p 95-96)

By their fruits you shall know them. As people move through life, hat things do they create and leave in their wake? Specifically, as we live our lives what thoughts fill our minds, what things do we produce, what sort of children do we beget, what sort of actions do we perform?

Do you see the source of my reluctance to embrace Hemlock unconditionally? All too often, the Hemlock position comes off as saying that it’s my life, I have absolute autonomy over it, and it is up to me to decide whether to live or die. It’s nobody’s else’s business but my own. All of which is true – but true only up to a point.

If you want believers to stand with you in favor of assisted dying you are going to have to give them some assurance that the event will be truly “human” on Heschel’s standards. Which is to say, that the assisted dying must be “relational” – taking others beside yourself into account; and not leaving chaos, evil and suffering in its wake to be dealt

with by those you leave behind. Only such a death is fully “human”, and only such a death qualifies as a “good death”.

A “good death” so defined is not so easy to come by these days in America. One reason is that American economists are teaching that self-interest is the key to human nature and the singular engine of human actions. Nobel laureate George Stigler has insisted that the concept of self-interest provides a universal explanation of all human activity. “Man is eternally a utility-maximizer”, he wrote, and not just in economic activity but “in his church, in his scientific work, in short, everywhere.” And fellow Nobel laureate, Gary Becker, has suggested how self-interest can be used to explain even the most personal of our decisions, including such things as marriage and child-bearing. It is one thing to teach such dribble, it is quite another to get the Nobel Prize for doing so.

This economic way of thinking has so permeated American thinking that it is corrupting all the “human” values. At the Politia Conference held at the Catholic University of Leuven in May of 1998, Robert Bellah astutely assessed the situation this way:

One way of putting it is to say that all the primary relationships in our society, those between employers and employees, between lawyers and clients, between doctors and patients, between universities and students are being stripped of any moral understanding other than that of market exchange.

Business has no obligation to its employees, the communities where it operates or the larger society. Its only obligation is to maximize profits, and if that means firing tens of thousands of workers and closing plants, so be it. The same forces that are uprooting decades-long practices in industry are to be found at work in medicine, education, and even in the church and the family. Instead of medicine we have the healthcare industry; instead of the university we have the education industry.

What we can see here is the generalization of the CEO (chief executive officer)/employee/customer pattern far beyond the economic sphere: the head of the HMO is the CEO, the doctors are the employees and the patients are the customers; the president of the university is the CEO, the faculty are the employees, and the students are the customers.

Bellah calls this degrading of primary relationships and their reduction to market exchange values: commodification. Under commodification workers, professional and blue collar, are looked at as valued employees but as vendors of their particular service. A person’s humanity, moral character and commitments, the larger purposes of one’s life and vocation are all irrelevant.

We must understand, then, that it is in such an atmosphere, one which debases all but economic relationships, that “near side” believers and Hemlock people are working for assisted dying. But given that state of affairs how can we insure that that for which we work together will actually result in a “good death”? Obviously, it is not enough to work

for a controlled and timely death of our own choosing. We must do all in our power to insure that such acts are done humanly, which is to say relationally. An act of assisted dying must not only allow for the exercise of our individual freedom and choice, but must also allow for the involvement of the people to whom we are bonded and with whom we have made our life journey. That is the minimum that religious people require in order for them to stand with you in endorsing assisted dying. Kenneth Vaux captures the spirit of those minimum requirements when he wrote:

“...religion grounds an ethic that honors life, yet receives death in due season, not when it is our individual whim but when we can discern the divine call in our soul and in the corroborative adieu of the loving community.”

It is hard to hear that “call” of God or of a loving community amid the thunder of commodification. Commodification is making all our social institutions suspect. Bottom-line thinking makes us wary and uncertain about whether we can trust anyone to act “humanly” and “humanely” and not just for profit. The longer it goes on and the wider it spreads the less secure we feel about all the aspects of our lives, but especially about the end of life issues. If we aren’t careful and vigilant the roar of greed will drown out the gentle voice of the God and loving communities. It is very hard to hear them in the present thunder.

The message is clear. In this era of commodification “assisted dying” is not enough – we must work for “assistance in dying humanly”. The question is, does Hemlock have the courage to soften its individualistic stance? Do believers have the courage to move from the “far side” to the “near side”? I believe that God is calling each group to do exactly that. Hopefully, we’ll find a way to answer that call. Thank You.

NOTE: Dick Westley is author of When It’s Right to Die,
Twenty-Third Publications, 1995